


CHESAPEAKE VALOR
— BOOK THREE —

BLIND SPOT

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To Janet Grant:
For being a fearless warrior,
friend, and advocate.
I'm blessed to partner with you
on this crazy writing journey.



PROLOGUE

Luke crouched behind an orange shipping container, dreading to think what it held.

Captain Jose Augero puffed on a cigar on the dock beside the *Bainbridge*. The stale breeze coming off the water was scant relief from Kuala Lumpur's sticky night air.

Flicking a mosquito from his neck, Luke turned from his study of the captain to watch headlights sweep over the shipping yard. Creaking echoed above him as the crane arm swung overhead, settling on a metal container three over from his position. Clamping ahold, the crane lifted the massive container high in the dark, starless sky and settled it onto the ship.

Luke held his breath as a black sedan stopped less than ten feet from the captain, spotlighting the man in a glare of headlights. Seconds later Harris Sayid stepped out of the car with a lift of his chin. "Jose."

This is it. Luke exhaled as adrenaline coursed through his veins. Inching closer, he prayed the shadows concealed him from

the men, and that the container he was using for cover wasn't the next to be transferred to the ship.

"Sir." Jose gave a curt nod, his dark eyes illuminated by the headlights. "I told you I have this under control. No need for you to oversee."

Sayid stepped forward. "Need I remind you what happened to your predecessor?"

"There's the difference. I'm not foolish enough to let a federal agent aboard my vessel."

Sayid waved off the cigar Jose offered him.

Jose shook his head. "You and all those rules . . ."

Sayid ignored the comment, disgust for Jose evident in his narrowing eyes. "I'm here to inform you we have a change in plans."

"Oh?" Jose flicked ashes on the pavement. "Hopefully not a cargo switch. The weapons and parts have just finished loading."

"No. Not the cargo—the destination. And it would do you well not to utter such words about what you carry."

"It's only my men here, and unlike Jackson's, my men fear and obey me."

Every fiber of Luke's being burned with the urge to stop this shipment in its tracks, to take the men out *now*, before the weapons and whatever parts they were referring to reached his homeland, but he'd been ordered to stand fast. *Listen and report*. While he understood the reasoning behind it, it felt innately wrong not to act. But if he did, it wouldn't stop the threat. It would only fuel it. A war was headed for U.S. soil, and tonight there wasn't a thing he could do to stop it.

"Why the change?" Jose asked at Sayid's silence.

"Baltimore is too hot right now. There's a fed there who has latched on to the paltry information he thinks he uncovered on the *Hiram*."

Jose chuckled. “You can’t stop *one* federal agent?”

“He’s been relentless—not to mention extremely lucky—but his days are numbered.”

Luke swallowed, knowing exactly whom they were referring to. His contact in Baltimore had informed him that his childhood friend Declan Grey had uncovered the arrival of Anajay Darmadi on the *Hiram* and was doggedly pursuing what he believed, correctly, was a pattern of terrorist activity. Luke’s finger itched on the trigger, every instinct whispering to squeeze it—to protect Declan, to protect them all.

“In the meantime, take the shipment into Galveston. Our man from Houston will transport the cargo back east.”

“You’re the boss, but isn’t Houston and the Galveston port how the other fed got onto us in the first place?”

“That needn’t concern you. *That* fed is dead. Soon the Baltimore one will be as well.”

“Fine, but it’s going to cost a hefty sum to get the manifest changed at this late date—to cut through the red tape.”

“I understand. Just take care of it.”

Jose nodded, exhaling a gray puff of smoke.

Sayid’s jaw tightened in the lights bouncing off his profile.

“And the doctor?” Jose asked.

“He’ll be liberated when the time is right.” Sayid swatted a bug off his damp white shirt, clinging to his back in the thick humidity. He studied Jose. “Why does the doctor matter so much to you?”

“I told you,” Jose said. “The doc and I made nice on his journey over. I don’t like him rotting in some prison cell.”

“He won’t be there much longer.” Sayid’s smile turned to one of malice. “And then their empire will crumble into dust.”

1

Declan Grey started his day as he did every other. He showered, shaved, dressed, drank a strong cup of black coffee, ate two slices of cinnamon-and-sugar toast, and then headed out the door to work, calling his friend Griffin for a quick chat as he drove.

The office was humming when he arrived, and he was pleased he'd made it nearly half an hour early, despite 695's horrific morning commute.

Today was the meeting he'd been pushing for with his boss for nigh on a month. An attack was headed for U.S. soil, and no one was doing a thing to acknowledge it—let alone stop it.

He entered the meeting room, planning to have time to run back through his argument before Alan King showed, but his boss was already there, deep in conversation with a woman. Both had their backs to him.

The woman was five foot seven, athletically lean and toned, her brown hair almost identical in shade to Tanner's. His gut sunk. *Tanner.*

It *was* Tanner. He knew her—knew the way she angled her head so her hair fell slightly over her right shoulder when she was deep in thought, knew the graceful curve of her neck, knew . . . *too much*. He cleared his throat, and they both turned.

The black dress she wore fit well, falling mid-knee, a few inches of fabric caressing the subtle line across her shoulders, leaving him wanting to . . . He shook off the thought, frustrated.

Something captivatingly drew him to her . . . and yet strangely gled him at the same time—as if he were underwater in her presence. All sound evaporated, he couldn't breathe, his vision grew limited, until all he saw was her. It was surprisingly peaceful, albeit alarmingly disorienting.

It had begun the day she'd entered his life, nearly a year earlier, showing up in his hospital room, dressed like a nurse, bent on obtaining answers about her friend's murder.

The surprising sensation he experienced in her presence had steadily grown in intensity until it now engulfed all else. He wasn't sure if he liked the effect or if he was drowning in it. His heart said the first, his head the latter.

One plus was his certainty that he no longer felt anything but friendship for Kate Maxwell—hadn't for months now—and considering how deeply in love she was with Luke Gallagher, the man who'd been his best friend for years, before his disappearance over seven years ago . . . it was a very good change. His crush on Kate was over, and in hindsight that's all it had been—a crush, along with genuine friendship, of course. But now . . . *now* he was drowning in the middle of an unanticipated ocean and a part of him reveled in being surrounded by the unknown.

He had the decision before him: fight the undertow or give in to his feelings and see where the current pulled him.

“Agent Grey,” Alan said, stealing back his attention, “I’d like you to meet the Bureau’s newest crisis counselor.”

Declan blinked. Had Alan seriously just said—?

“We’re well acquainted,” Tanner said, before he could finish his thought.

She settled into one of the conference room chairs, and he sat down beside her, his shoulders stiff. “Not sure I’d say *well* . . .”

There was so much about her he didn’t know, so much he longed to. What she liked and didn’t like. How she spent her downtime. What scared her, if anything. What thrilled her, though he already knew rushes of adrenaline did. At least she spent most of the year finding it through healthy means via rock climbing, white-water rafting, kayaking, snowboarding, and the list went on. She was an all-weather and all-season athlete much like him.

She sighed. “Of course you’d say that.”

He tucked his chin in. “Meaning?” He’d meant it as a compliment, an indication that he wanted to know more, but it didn’t appear she was taking it as such.

She flipped open her folder, shaking her head. “Never mind.”

“All right then.” *Moving on* . . . He opened his case folder, convinced he’d never understand women—Tanner Shaw least of all.



Griffin entered the offices of Grant & Brentwood Investments.

“Mr. McCray,” the receptionist greeted him. “Mr. Grant said to head on back.”

“Thanks, Jen.” He walked the long, narrow, glass-walled hall.

Haywood Grant occupied the corner office at the end. He’d

started the firm more than twenty years earlier, running it solo for the first dozen years before bringing on his partner, Lowell Brentwood, and, much more recently, Emmitt Powell, who had yet to earn his name as part of the firm's.

"Griff." Haywood smiled and stood as Griffin entered the office. "How are you, son?" He clapped Griffin on the back.

Haywood had coached his, Declan, Luke, and Parker's Little League team, the Chesapeake Pirates, for three seasons before moving from their hometown of Chesapeake Harbor. But after three key developmental years, the *son* stuck. As well as the bond of a boy and his first coach.

Their paths had crossed now and again over the years when Haywood visited his brother who'd still lived in Chesapeake Harbor, and then more recently when a mutual acquaintance recommended Haywood's accounting and investment firm. Griff had been visiting Haywood annually ever since, today being an exception to the otherwise yearly schedule.

"Come on in," Haywood said. "Let me shut the door."

Griff wondered what level of privacy the glass-walled office really provided.

Haywood returned to his seat as Griffin took his.

"So what brings you here today?"

Griffin exhaled, joy bursting inside. "I need to withdraw some funds from one of my accounts."

"Oh?" Haywood sat back, interlocking his fingers. "Another rehab project?"

Griff flipped houses—or, as he preferred to say, *restored* them—before putting them on the market. "Not this time. I put down a deposit on a plot of land in Sweet Air. I'm going to build Finley's and my home on it, and I want to pay for the land before I start construction." The farmhouse he'd been flipping

when he'd met Finley was way up in Thurmont. He'd sold it to a very happy couple, and he and Finley were now renting a place in the Sweet Air area, which they'd fallen in love with.

Haywood leaned forward with a wide smile. "Well, that's great. Congratulations." He shook Griffin's hand, and Griff noticed the lack of wedding band on Haywood's. He prayed Haywood's ring was being fixed, sized, or forgotten on his nightstand, but a glance around the office revealed the pictures of Carol were gone.

"I hope to see that beautiful wife of yours at the retreat kick-off tonight." Haywood continued to smile.

"She'll be there." He wanted to say "And Carol?" but wasn't sure the best way to proceed. "Will your kids be there again?" he asked.

"I'm afraid not this year. Maggie and her husband moved to Denver six months back, and Jack can't get away from the hustle and bustle of New York."

"That's too bad."

"And since you always inquire about Carol, I'll save you some trouble. We called it quits a few months back."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"Well, after Jack moved out and we shifted to an empty nest, we realized we had nothing else in common. It just wasn't working."

So you make it work. At least that was his commitment to Finley and their marriage. It was for life. They exchanged vows, and he'd honor them until the day God took him home. Finley deserved him to be the man he'd promised to be. She deserved the world.

"Well, let's get down to the nitty gritty and get you that land," Haywood said, rolling his chair to his computer.

A knock rapped on the door, and Haywood's jaw tightened along with his broad shoulders.

Griffin looked over his right shoulder at the doorway.

Lowell Brentwood stepped into the room. "Sorry to interrupt . . ."

"Yes?" Haywood responded to Lowell, his tone tight.

"When you're finished here, we're going to congregate in the meeting room to finalize the retreat presentation."

Haywood nodded, but didn't look at his partner. "I'll be there."

He said it pleasantly, but the tension in the room was palpable—thicker than a Chesapeake Harbor fog rolling in across the dark water on a cold October night.

Lowell excused himself, shutting the door behind him but continuing to stare through the glass wall until he moved out of their line of sight. *Weird.*

Griffin had interacted with Lowell numerous times over the years, and always saw him at the firm's annual client retreat, but he had never noticed such a strain between the two. It would be interesting to see how the men interacted at the retreat.

He and Finley were looking forward to the time away to soak in the gorgeous Hunt Valley setting. There were plenty of places to hike between Oregon Ridge and Loch Raven, to watch the sunset over the fall foliage, and to ride horses less than half an hour from where he planned to build their home.

Typically, the retreat was for the firm's wealthiest clients, but because of Haywood's fondness for his Pirates, he always invited them and, graciously enough, their significant others. Now that he thought about it, Lowell never seemed a fan of their presence, so maybe that was the source of the partners' tension.

Haywood cleared his throat. “Where were we? Ah, money for your land. How much do you need?”

Griffin’s gaze narrowed. Was that perspiration on Haywood’s brow?

“Is everything all right?” he asked.

Haywood swiped his forehead and rubbed his fingers. “Fine.”

The man sitting before Griffin was hardly fine, but he let it go and they proceeded. It wasn’t until they were nearly finished with their business and Haywood appeared no more at ease that Griffin took a chance and asked again.

Again Haywood said he was fine, but this time, he scrawled something on a neon yellow sticky pad, pulled off the top slip, and handed it to Griffin.

Meet me at Le Scala restaurant at noon.

Griffin nodded once and slipped the note into his pocket, his mind racing through the endless possibilities.

“Always good to see you, son.”

Apparently, he’d be seeing him again in three hours. About what, he had no idea, but from Haywood’s appearance, it was far from good.



“As I’ve been saying since our discoveries on the *Hiram* two months ago, I believe there is credible evidence of an imminent terrorist threat against our country,” Declan said, getting straight to the point. Alan indicated Tanner had insight to add to the meeting, but had not elaborated.

Curiosity nipped at Declan. What insight? Would she make his third plea to his boss that they continue strongly pursuing this investigation easier or more difficult? With Tanner, it usually fell somewhere in between—challenging yet helpful. He

prayed that was the case in this situation because he needed all the help he could get.

Alan shifted, his hands balling into pale fists on the conference table's black top. "Agent Grey, what evidence are you basing this belief on?"

"Mr. Darmadi's dying words: 'The wrath is here.'"

Alan flicked his hand, dismissing Declan's greatest argument as if it were an annoying fly. "That is not evidence—you know that. Over the last two months, in all the hours and manpower you've dedicated to this pursuit, have you found a shred of *evidence* to substantiate Mr. Darmadi's declaration?"

"There's been . . . chatter." Declan exhaled, knowing his boss would dismiss this as casually as he had Darmadi's dying words.

Alan pushed back in his swivel chair, his long, slender fingers twitching on the armrests. He was losing his patience. "Chatter?"

Declan cleared his throat, stretched his shoulders until his muscles contracted in the center of his back, and took a deep breath before responding. Everything rode on this. "Yes, sir." He pulled out his notebook. "I've been listening for code words." He flipped through the transcript pages until he found the one he wanted, highlighted and tabbed.

Tanner glanced over, curiosity dancing in her beautiful brown eyes, but she didn't say a word.

She was usually the first to speak and the one to protest or argue most vehemently, and she was good at it. It made for some of the best verbal sparring and deep discussions he'd ever had. He found her savvy wit and intelligence both impressive and sexy. Yes, much to his chagrin, he thought Tanner Shaw all those things and more. He admired the woman, and she'd come to mean a great deal to him.

When it had happened—when his feelings had shifted and become far, far deeper—he wasn't quite certain, but it had definitely happened.

“And?” Alan tapped his fingers.

Declan swallowed. He needed to focus, to speed this up. *Get your head in the game, Grey.* “I’ve heard chatter about the family expanding.”

Alan cocked his head. “What family?”

Declan moved to the whiteboard, where he placed his surveillance photos. “A man from Malaysia immigrated four years ago and has been steadily bringing over an intriguing number of ‘nephews.’”

Alan frowned. “Nephews?”

“Yes, sir. Supposed relatives. Young Southeast Asian men in their early twenties—all Muslim.” He paused briefly but wanted, *needed*, to keep pounding the importance of this case into his boss’s shortsighted mind. “Several are on student visas, pursuing degrees in biochemistry, chemical engineering, or biology. The first young man he brought over now specializes in virology.”

“Smart nephews.”

“All fourteen of them?”

“Have you checked if they really are his nephews? Some families are large.”

“Documentation in that area is easily bought, but we’re digging deeper, and we have the CIA regional department overseas digging as well. Mack’s been a great help.”

Michael “Mack” Jacobs was his main contact at the CIA, the agent who served as a liaison between Declan and whatever region he needed help from. Over the years, he’d become a friend, the two meeting occasionally for dinner or a cup of joe

in Georgetown, where Mack resided, or he'd come up Declan's way for a pickup game of rugby with the guys.

Parker was leery of anybody in the CIA, but he too liked Mack as a person. He just didn't trust the *agency* as an entity, said he didn't like the *read* he got off most agents—said they were called “spooks” for a reason. But even he agreed they were a necessary agency, just not one he wanted any part of.

Alan exhaled, steeping his fingers. “This had better be worth it.”

“It is. I'm telling you, I can feel it in my gut.”

“Well, luckily for you, Miss Shaw believes she has something too, and I hope it is more concrete than her gut and some chatter.” Alan indicated for her to proceed.

“Thank you.” Tanner nodded, and Declan found himself literally sitting on the edge of the swivel chair, scooting out from the conference table before his knees knocked the underside of it again.

“Over the last few months, I've been in regular contact with Mira,” she said.

“The woman taken from the house where Anajay Darmadi was staying?” Declan asked.

“Yes. After your raid on the house, my former organization, the Intercultural Resource Center,” she said, no doubt more for Alan's information than his, “safely placed her in a new location and have been working with her to make a new life for her here in America.”

“That's wonderful,” Alan said, “but its pertinence to the case . . . ?”

That was rude. What Tanner did was beyond admirable, but that was Alan—always direct and focused on the case at hand.

“That’s great,” he said, truly admiring her work and compassion for those in need.

She tucked her hair behind her ear. “Thank you,” she responded, clearly surprised. He hated that his respect and admiration for her work surprised her. He wanted her to know how genuinely he believed in what she did, in how she relentlessly fought for the rights of the marginalized and oppressed. It was just *how* she sometimes went about it—without any concern for her safety—that terrified him.

“Miss Shaw?” Alan grunted.

“Right,” she said. “Mira confided in me that before the house was raided, men were coming through at a regular pace. From there they were moved to strategic locations to wait until they were called upon.”

“Called upon by whom?” Alan asked, straightening.

She had him. *Finally*. He was reeled in, or at least interested.

“She didn’t know. No names were used.”

“What do you know of this woman? Can she be trusted?”

“I know she was brought over against her will on a ship from Malaysia. Her father sold her to a man who in turn handed her over to a different man after the ship docked in Baltimore’s port.”

“Did she say who bought her from her father?” Alan pressed. He wanted the facts and wanted them quickly.

You’ve got this, Tanner. Fighting his impulse to let Alan have it for being so bullish, Declan said a silent prayer for God to guide and strengthen her. He knew she could handle the situation, and her occasional hostility toward his attempts to protect her was a clear sign that she was no fan of his treatment. He didn’t blame her. It was just that when it came to Tanner, a highly protective mode kicked in—so strong, he felt helpless to control it at times.

“She can describe the man, but she doesn’t know his name. She thought he was the captain of the ship that transported her to the U.S. She said he’s American.”

Declan’s muscles coiled. The captain of the *Hiram*, the merchant ship sailing under a Malaysian flag, who snuck Anajay Darmadi into the country was American. A former soldier who was currently serving time for smuggling and treason.

Could it be the same man? Randal Jackson had smuggled in not only Darmadi but dozens of refugees whom he and his crew treated like slaves. If it hadn’t been for Tanner’s intervention, those refugees would now be the property of “business man” and loan shark Max Stallings, who too was now serving time for human trafficking.

Both men had also been linked to FBI agent Steven Burke, who’d been undercover on the *Hiram*. Whether he was under FBI sanction or not was still up for debate, but he’d been killed on the ship. Most likely by Darmadi when, Declan was guessing, Burke’s true identity came to light. Burke was yet another facet of this case Declan had barely scratched the surface of.

“If I showed Mira a picture of the man I believe she’s describing, would she be willing to look?” Declan asked.

Tanner’s eyes narrowed. “You’re thinking Randal Jackson, aren’t you?”

He nodded. “Will Mira look at his picture?”

“I can ask,” Tanner said cautiously.

Alan stood, collected his files, and smoothed his jacket. “Here’s what we’re going to do. You two are going to work this together.”

“Excuse me?” Declan swallowed. He already had a partner. Not that he wouldn’t mind the time spent with Tanner.

“What?” Tanner’s face brightened.

Of course it would. Any chance of danger.

“Agent Kadyrov is on bereavement leave for her father’s death out west. So in the meantime, you two”—he pointed between them—“see what you can get out of Mira, dig a little deeper on this ‘family’ and the nephews, find out what the CIA learns on their end through Mack, and pay Captain Randal Jackson another visit in the pen *if* Mira identifies him as the man who brought her over from Malaysia.” He stood and headed for the door. Once in the hallway, he turned with a frown on his face. “*If* by the time Lexi returns to work you two don’t have anything concrete, we’re letting this go. It’s already been two months, and I fear we’re chasing nothing but ghosts.”